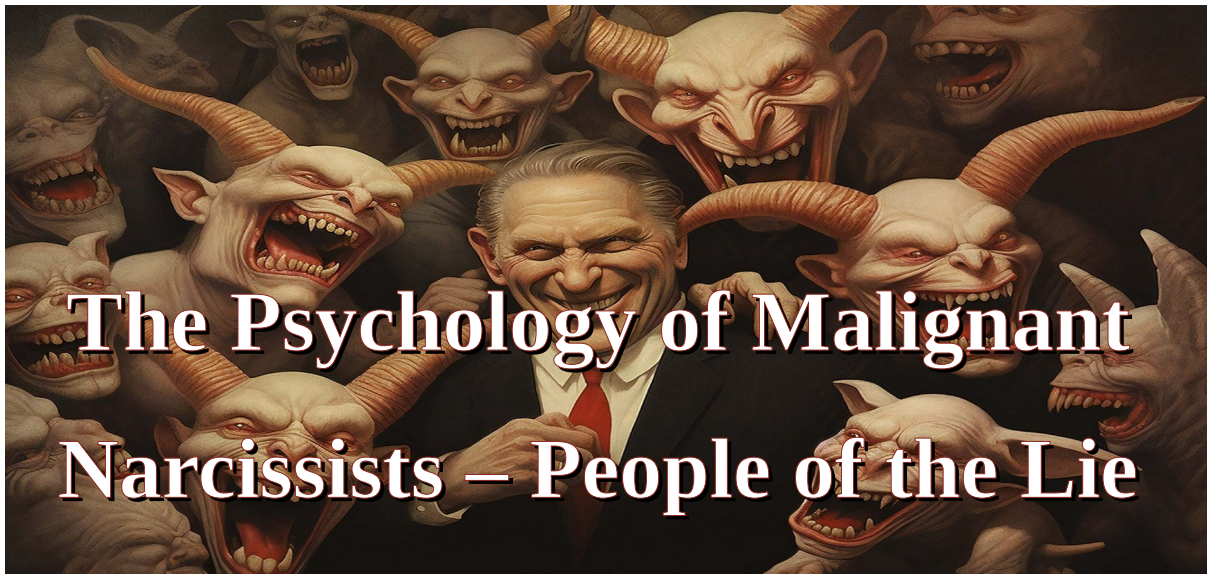




# ACADEMY of IDEAS

FREE MINDS FOR A FREE SOCIETY



*“Evil is not committed by people who feel uncertain about their righteousness, who question their own motives, who worry about betraying themselves. The evil in this world is committed by the spiritual fat cats, by the Pharisees of our own day, the self-righteous who think they are without sin because they are unwilling to suffer the discomfort of significant self-examination.”*

*M. Scott Peck, People of the Lie*

Most politicians proclaim themselves to be exemplars of virtue, but many of them compulsively lie, engage in corruption, censor and demonize those who disagree with them, and enact policies that destroy society. Are such politicians aware of their hypocrisy? Do they truly believe in the morally righteous self-image they try to portray? In this video, drawing from the insights of the American psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, we explore the psychology of malignant narcissism in order to better understand the evil that has infected modern politics.

M. Scott Peck defines evil as *“that force, residing either inside or outside of human beings, that seeks to kill life or liveliness.”*, or as he continues:

*“...evil is ‘live’ spelt backward. Evil is in opposition to life...Specifically, it has to do with...unnecessary killing, killing that is not required for biological survival...Evil is also that which kills spirit. There are various essential attributes of life – particularly human life – such as sentience, mobility, awareness, growth, autonomy, will. It is possible to kill or attempt to kill one of these attributes without actually destroying the body.”*

*M. Scott Peck, People of the Lie*

All of us are capable of committing evil acts; for as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn noted *“the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being”*. Nonetheless, two types of people are

particularly prone to evil actions: psychopaths, and malignant narcissists. The psychopath's potential for evil is well-known, but it is the malignant narcissists who may be responsible for more of the world's evil as they outnumber the psychopaths, and as Peck writes in *The People of the Lie*:

“It would be quite appropriate to classify evil people as constituting a specific variant of the narcissistic personality disorder...psychiatrists have begun to pay increasing attention to the phenomenon of narcissism, but our understanding of the subject is still in its infancy.”

*M. Scott Peck, People of the Lie*

The central characteristic of narcissism is an inflated sense of self. Narcissists are overconfident and admire themselves to a degree that is not warranted by the reality of who they are, or what they have accomplished. The narcissist's infatuation with a grandiose self-image leads to self-absorption, reducing their capacity to empathize with the feelings and experiences of other people. Narcissism exists on a continuum; some of the milder forms of narcissism, such as identifying with an idealized self-image one creates on social media, are unhealthy, but relatively benign. At the extreme end of the spectrum lies the pathology of malignant narcissism, in which one identifies with an illusory self-image of moral purity. Or as Peck explains:

“Utterly dedicated to preserving their self-image of perfection, [malignant narcissists] are unceasingly engaged in the effort to maintain the appearance of moral purity... While they seem to lack any motivation to be good, they intensely desire to appear good. Their ‘goodness’ is all on a level of pretense. It is, in effect, a lie. This is why they are the ‘people of the lie.’”

*M. Scott Peck, People of the Lie*

Malignant narcissism is a defensive phenomenon that is rooted in a deep fear of being inferior or inadequate, particularly in matters of morality. Due to childhood trauma, growing up with hyper-critical or narcissistic parents, or for other reasons of upbringing, socialization, or genetics, the malignant narcissist cannot acknowledge that, like everyone else, they make mistakes, behave immorally, and possess a potential for evil that is rooted in human nature. Or as Peck writes:

“What is the cause of this arrogant self-image of perfection, this particularly malignant type of narcissism? Basically, it is fear. [Malignant narcissists] are continually frightened that they will come face-to-face with their own evil... This terror is so chronic, so interwoven into the fabric of their being, that they may not even feel it as such. And if they could, their omnipresent narcissism will prohibit them from ever acknowledging it.”

*M. Scott Peck, People of the Lie*

When psychologically healthy people commit an immoral or evil act, they acknowledge their wrongdoing, feel guilt and remorse, and attempt to make amends by returning to the side of the good. Most of us, in other words, have a functioning conscience which places moral constraints on our behavior. The conscience of the malignant narcissist, in contrast, is forced into a state of dormancy by continual acts of self-deception. As the malignant narcissist's identity is anchored in a grandiose self-image of moral goodness, when he morally falters, he resorts to rationalizations, confabulations, and other defense mechanisms to maintain a feeling of moral righteousness, thus

bypassing the conscience and escaping feelings of guilt. Because the malignant narcissist silences his conscience with ongoing self-deceptions he can repeatedly lie and behave in ways that oppose life, yet still believe that he is on the side of good. Or as Peck explains further:

“It is not their sins per se that characterize [malignant narcissists], rather it is the subtlety and persistence and consistency of their sins. This is because the central defect of [malignant narcissists] is not the sin but the refusal to acknowledge it...Rather than blissfully lacking a sense of morality, like the psychopath, [malignant narcissists] are continually engaged in sweeping the evidence of their evil under the rug of their own consciousness...It is out of their failure to put themselves on trial that their evil arises.”

*M. Scott Peck, People of the Lie*

One of the main self-deceptive mechanisms which the malignant narcissist uses to avoid awareness of his morally imperfect self, is, paradoxically, the very mechanism that leads him to commit some of his most evil acts. This mechanism is scapegoating, which, as Peck notes, “*works through a mechanism psychiatrists call projection.*” The malignant narcissist unconsciously externalizes the emotions and motivations he cannot accept in himself, attributing them to other people, and he then blames these targets for what in reality are his own moral failings and wrongdoings.

“A predominant characteristic...of the behaviour of [malignant narcissists] is scapegoating. Because in their hearts they consider themselves above reproach, they must lash out at anyone who does reproach them. Since they must deny their own badness, they must perceive others as bad...They never think of themselves as evil; on the other hand, they consequently see much evil in others.”

*M. Scott Peck, People of the Lie*

Narcissistic scapegoating is on full display in the political world. Many politicians today are so desperate to appear morally righteous that they categorically refuse to consider the possibility that their policies, mandates, and social reforms are the primary drivers of much that is wrong with society. When presented with evidence of their catastrophic failures, or when other people challenge their morally flawless self-image, political malignant refuse to accept blame, and instead double down on their policies and heap the blame for society’s problems upon their favored scapegoats – be it other nations, political opponents, or individuals who merely happen to hold differing political views. Or as Peck explains:

“Strangely enough, [malignant narcissists] are often destructive because they are attempting to destroy evil. The problem is that they misplace the locus of the evil. Instead of destroying others they should be destroying the sickness within themselves... As life often threatens their self-image of perfection, [malignant narcissists] are often busily engaged in hating and destroying that life—usually in the name of righteousness...They sacrifice others to preserve their self-image of perfection...They create for those under their dominion a miniature sick society.”

*M. Scott Peck, People of the Lie*

In observing the sick state of society, we may be tempted to impose the diagnosis of malignant narcissism on any politician we disapprove of. But in doing so we run the risk not only of a misdiagnosis, but worse, of mimicking the malignant narcissist’s scapegoating behavior. Or as Peck reflects:

“Indeed, might I not be guilty of evil myself by so labelling others who disagree with my opinions? Might I not be misusing the concept of evil by facilely applying it to any and all who oppose my judgment?”

*M. Scott Peck, People of the Lie*

To avoid misdiagnosing and scapegoating others, we need to become more conscious of our dark side. For the more aware we are of our own moral failures and potential for evil, the less likely we are to project our dark side onto others. Or as Jung writes: “*Many projections can ultimately be integrated back into the individual once he recognizes their subjective origin.*” (Carl Jung, *Practice of Psychotherapy*) But by facing up to our dark side, we do more than withdraw our projections, we also develop a sixth sense to detect the darkness which lurks behind the malignant narcissists’ morally pure mask. For as the psychologist Marie Louise von Franz observed:

“If one knows about the evil possibilities within oneself then one develops a kind of second sight or capacity for getting a whiff of the same thing in other people...to go down into the depths of one’s own evil enables one usually to develop the instinctual recognition of corresponding elements in other people.”

*Marie Louise von Franz, The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*

With a heightened capacity to detect evil, we can help others overcome their naivety regarding the reality of human evil. For the reason malignant narcissists are able to gain popular support and persist in positions of political power, is because most people refuse to fathom the fact that someone who tries so hard to appear good, can in reality be morally corrupt. Most people, in other words, do not recognize that evil has a tendency to cloak itself in the good. Or as the psychologist Erich Fromm observed:

“...the main fallacy which prevents people from recognizing potential Hitlers before they have shown their true faces...lies in the belief that a thoroughly destructive and evil man must be a devil – and look his part; that he must bear the sign of Cain so visibly that everyone can recognize his destructiveness from afar. Such devils exist, but they are rare...much more often the intensely destructive person will show a front of kindness...he will speak of his ideals and good intentions...Hence, as long as one believes that the evil man wears horns, one will not discover an evil man.”

*Erich Fromm, The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*

As more of us become aware of the political evil that is dividing and destroying society, we should try, as much as possible, not to let anger and hatred sully our attempts to be a force of good. Malignant narcissists are easy to hate, but harboring hatred only nourishes their malevolence and makes us easy targets of scapegoating. Hatred also harms us through the stress it generates in the mind and body. Rather than stewing in hatred, we should focus our energies on spreading the truth, as truth is one of the greatest weapons against evil – hence why Satan is often referred to as “the father of lies”. We should call out the hypocrisy of the political malignant narcissists, expose their lies, mock their overweening moral pride, and watch on as the truth renders their behavior increasingly desperate, erratic, and eventually self-destructive. “*Pride goeth before the fall*”. Or as M. Scott Peck concludes: